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‘Wanted: Foreign Fighters – The Escalating Threat of ISIL in Central Asia’

Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (Helsinki Commission)

Congressional Hearing

Rep. Chris Smith (NJ-04), Chairman

June 10, 2015

Welcome to our witnesses and to everyone joining us this afternoon for this hearing on foreign fighters and the escalating threat of ISIL in Central Asia.

The UN Security Council recently estimated that there are now over 25,000 foreign terrorist fighters from over 100 countries who have travelled internationally, mainly to Syria and Iraq, to join or fight for terrorist entities associated with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL, and Al-Qaida.

How can our government, working with others and with organizations like the OSCE, prevent these terror-minded men and women from volunteering and traveling to the Middle East – equally important, how can we prevent their return home? One of the gravest dangers faced today by dozens of countries is that returning foreign fighters will bring with them jihad and murder.

International Crisis Group estimates that approximately 2-4,000 foreign fighters come from the five countries of central Asia. Just last week, we learned that the chief of Tajikistan’s counter-terrorism program – someone highly trained by our own government – abandoned his post to join ISIL.

As this indicates the Central Asian governments face major challenges here. Many of these derive from their history as part of the Soviet Union, from wars in nearby Afghanistan and from limited economic development, which has led millions of their citizens to seek employment abroad, especially in Russia. The discrimination and exploitation to which those workers are subjected, as well as the decline of the Russian economy and changes in the Russian visa regime, have reduced the remittances these workers can send home to support their families and may

have contributed to creating the conditions that ISIL uses to recruit foreign fighters from among different Central Asian nationalities.

Some of the challenges the central Asia governments face are of their own making – including widespread corruption, lack of rule of law, and their own human rights records. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have particularly terrible human rights records, among the worst in the world in respect of political prisoners and torture. All of these factors are exploited by ISIL recruiters and other organizations promoting radicalization and violent extremism.

It should be the particular role of the United States to promote, to the central Asian governments, our conviction that “fighting terrorism” is no excuse for violating human rights or the rule of law.

I look forward to hearing about the many issues here, including counteracting radicalization of potential foreign fighters, inhibiting the travel of recruits and volunteers to the Middle East, disrupting financial support to fighters and their families, and preventing their return to their home countries. This is in the first place the responsibility of the governments, and there is the question of what they are trying to do and how well they are doing it. There is the question of what our government and the OSCE is doing and can do better, working with the central Asian governments – here we need to talk about issues of document security, border security and law enforcement coordination. I hope we can touch on all of these aspects.